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PROGRAM CBS Evening News

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SUBJECT Electronic Spy Operation

DAN RATHER: In another U.S.-Soviet development, Pentagon correspondent David Martin has been told how Soviet secret police in Moscow have been getting the latest word on sensitive U.S. Embassy documents even before U.S. officials read them.

DAVID MARTIN: Informed sources tell CBS News that for at least one year, and probably longer, the American Embassy in Moscow was the victim of a sophisticated electronic spy operation which gave Soviet leaders an inside look at what U.S. diplomats were doing and planning. Soviet agents secretly installed tiny sensing devices in about a dozen embassy typewriters. The devices picked up the contents of documents typed by embassy secretaries and transmitted them to antennas hidden in the embassy walls. The antennas, in turn, relayed the signals to a listening post outside the embassy.

The typewriters were in use from 1982 until the operation was uncovered in 1984. However, intelligence experts now think Moscow was running an earlier version of the same operation. An antenna discovered in the cleanup after this 1978 fire now appears to have been part of that earlier operation.

Depending on the location of the bugget typewriters, the Soviets were able to receive copies of everything from routine administrative memos to highly classified documents. One intelligence officer said the potential compromise of sensitive information should be viewed with, quote, considerable seriousness. Another intelligence expert said no one knows for sure how many or what secrets were compromised. A third official called the entire affair a fiasco.

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Officials say they do not know exactly how the Russians managed to install the bugs. These same officials also say the bugs might still be in place had it not been for a warning from a friendly government whose own embassy had been the target of a similar eavesdropping operation.